

**T**HE FIRST HINT OF JUST HOW VASTLY DIFFERENT life would be in Singapore came when Maree and I asked our realtor where we should consider living, and what areas we should avoid. Coming from Washington, DC, in 2000, it was a perfectly reasonable question. Even today, look at a map of DC and there is a stark geographical divide in the crime rate, as in many cities worldwide. Our realtor looked puzzled, and asked what we meant. I began to explain how I wanted to feel safe walking after dark. She smiled

“the poor white trash of Asia.”

I had since read up on its history and visited for business, as head of communications for the World Bank’s East Asia and Pacific department. But those visits, massively jet-lagged after 24-hours’ flying from Washington, and usually a string of formal meetings and dinners, left me with only vague, unconnected impressions, of clean streets, beautiful tropical plants, soft yellow streetlights and equally soft night air. It was a hard place to make sense of, let alone define, quite unlike any other

# SINGAPORE YEARS



and cut me off: “It’s not like that here. We don’t have bad areas.” I thought she must have misunderstood, but over the next eight years in Singapore, I was to learn just how right she was, and what an extraordinary effect that one simple fact would have on my family, my own life and my sense of possibility. There were no “bad areas.” Singapore was not like other cities. She had not misunderstood me; I had misunderstood Singapore, and not for the last time.

I knew only a little of Singapore before deciding to move there. I first heard of it as a boy in Sydney in the 1960s. Singapore was gaining independence then, with bombings and riots in the streets. Adults still spoke bitterly of the infamous Changi prison in World War II, where a large number of Australian soldiers were held, and where many had died. Years later, as a journalist in Melbourne, I was shocked by the blunt warning of Singapore’s first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, that Australians could become

A former journalist and Director of Communications for the World Bank, **PETER STEPHENS** reflects on the beauty of a city much misunderstood in the West.

Asian city I had visited. For a start, its success in going from poverty and social unrest in the 1960s to developed and stable in the 1980s was unique. Singapore’s experience had (and still has) a lot to teach the world about leadership, political decision making and social cohesion.

Where other countries swapped a colonial past for a corrupt and authoritarian future, Singapore built a functioning democracy. Where other countries in Asia stalled at middle-income level, Singapore kept increasing national wealth. It was, in the literal sense of the word, exceptional. It was distinct even from the other two high-income financial hubs in Asia; neither as sprawling and crowded as Tokyo, nor as frenetic and tangled as Hong Kong.

For me, the decision to move was an easy one, quite apart from the fact that Singapore was a living example of the World Bank’s mission statement of reducing poverty. Trying to work from Washington





Training for an Ironman triathlon in Singapore meant long rides in the heat, humid runs through the Botanic Gardens and the occasional encounter with a monitor lizard. It also meant fitting that training in amid work and plenty of regional travel—at left, Peter (wearing glasses) attends a press conference with then-Secretary of Finance for the Philippines (with microphone) and head of the World Bank’s country office.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF PETER STEPHENS



with 14 offices scattered across Asia and the Pacific was impossible, and left me with a daily sense of inadequacy and frustration. I felt too remote and always behind. Twelve hours of time difference made it hard to maintain more than irregular contact with so many offices, each with its own issues and needs. I believed that by moving to Asia I could reverse the dynamic, be in touch with the Asian and Pacific offices in real time and manage Washington in the mornings and evenings.

When I first raised the idea of moving, I was surprised at the quick and negative response from many of the people I worked with. Most seemed to harbor suspicions, even antipathy, toward Singapore. I knew that Singapore infuriated and frustrated people at the World Bank, because it refused to play by the normal rules of development. It didn't want loans, which it saw as a form of welfare dependence; it wanted specific, tailored advice and knowledge, not generic academic studies. It wanted to make its own decisions, and control its own affairs. But even so, the depth of feeling surprised me.

It is not "real" Asia, I was told, and not at all representative of developing countries. Of course it succeeded—it is a small island. The government is heavy-handed. There is no free speech. You can't even chew gum. It's too clean. And so on, almost all nonsense, and an interesting commentary on people whose lives were devoted to development, and who I had expected would be more curious to learn lessons from, and even applaud, Singapore's success. Only a few mentioned the environmental beauty of the island, the logistical and personal advantages of being based there (it is no accident that so many companies have regional headquarters in Singapore), the world-class healthcare and education, the way things actually work (including social security and public housing), and how immensely liberating it is to be in a society with low crime and efficient public services. I don't recall a single person mentioning the fragrant spices of Little India or the old charm of Tiong Bahru, the quiet of the forest path around MacRitchie Reservoir or the fresh fruit and vegetables available all year round in the local markets. But Singapore is all these things.

In July 2000, we set off, with our two younger children (entering grades eight and 11). Friends in Washington were appalled that we would take our daughter out of school at the end of tenth grade ("What about her friends? What about getting into university?"), and one even offered to board her for her final two years. Maree and I found this all rather bizarre. We wanted schools to inspire a love of

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learning, a curiosity, but above all, to do no harm. We wanted our children to see the world not as somewhere you visit but as somewhere you live, a "here" without needing a "there," an "us" without a "them." We wanted our children to have a sense of fewer boundaries and greater appreciation. The schools in Singapore rank among the best in the world anyway, so what could possibly be the problem?

So began an extraordinary time for us all, including our two older children who were already at university in the US and visited us for holidays. It was a time that we recall with fondness and disbelief even today, years later. I traveled more than I ever had, but it was easier than it had ever been. I was more productive at work, and it was less disruptive at home. Maree could run in the Botanic Gardens at any time, or go out anywhere on the island, without the slightest concern. Our children experienced the freedom of having dinner by the river or at a hawker center with friends and getting a bus home at 11 pm without any fear on their part or ours. They got to know the joy of visiting Bali or Langkawi for a few days' holiday, and of traveling in Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and further afield in India, New Zealand and Australia. Maree no longer drove children to school; in fact, for eight years we didn't even need a car. And the icing on the cake for me was that I was able to resume training for Ironman triathlons.

It sounds like an impossible combination—the work, the travel, the vacations and the training—but that was the miracle of Singapore: it redrew life's boundaries, in so many unexpected ways. For a start, freed of back-to-back meetings in Washington, I was able to do more meaningful work in four hours than I used to in 10. That gave me time and mental space to plan, to build relationships and to connect with my other offices—in other words, to actually do useful work. It also allowed me to approach each day feeling fresher and sharper.

One thing I learned right away in Singapore was that time really mattered. Meetings were focused. Phone calls had to have a purpose. There was no "winging it." When you visited a government minister, he or she was meticulously prepared and briefed. They knew precisely what they wanted from the meeting, and they managed the discussion with delicate ruthlessness to get it. If there were a series of meetings over a day or two, each government official would have been briefed on the content of the meetings before. Time was not spent, it was invested. There had to be a return. The same was true of meetings with business leaders, civil society groups and academic groups.

While visiting colleagues from Washington were often only too happy to explain at length their latest economic study or opinions on events in Asia, Singaporean government officials would nod and gently probe. They would listen patiently, with a junior staff member off to one side taking notes. I once sat in a meeting with a senior World Bank official and an equally senior Singapore government official. The Bank official spoke for perhaps 55 of the 60 minutes, and left feeling he had made a real impact. He asked me how I thought the meeting had gone. “You learned nothing,” I said. “He won.” It became a personal mantra of mine: The best prepared person in the room always wins, and the best prepared person usually asked, listened and said little.

Just as Singapore has challenged established wisdom on economics, leadership and development, so it challenged me directly in managing my own life. For example, travel had, for many years, been cumbersome and complex. It took a lot of time, planning and effort, and was frighteningly expensive. In Singapore, travel became simple, even a pleasure. It took 25 minutes from home in a taxi to Changi Airport, one of the cleanest and most efficient in the world. I could catch the early flight to Jakarta (less than two hours), on Singapore Airlines, one of the best airlines in the world, and come back that evening. Or, I could fly to Bangkok (two and a half hours) for a day of meetings, go to bed in Phnom Penh (one hour 15 minutes) or Hanoi (two hours), and return a day later, without jetlag, and having used the flight to prepare or follow up. I once landed at Changi and

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**An Ironman triathlon is a 2.4 mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a marathon (26.2 miles)—raced in order, without any breaks. Below, Peter Stephens finishes an Ironman in Langkawi, Malaysia, in 2002. Temperatures on race day neared 100°F (37°C).**



was home 30 minutes later.

Another example: In Washington, getting up in the dark on a winter’s morning to train was not much fun. For at least three months of the year, it took courage and mental games to lure myself from the warmth of my bed to run or ride or swim. Often, honestly, I didn’t, because there comes a point where ice and snow and subzero wind chill just make the whole idea of training miserable. In Singapore, there is no winter. Getting up to go for a run or ride or swim was a pleasure every day of the year, even well before dawn. The early morning air was still, the temperature was around 26°C (never a need to check weather online first), and the humidity was around 90%. The streets were quiet, well-lit, smooth and completely safe. Running before dawn in the Botanical Gardens was a mystical experience, with the only hazard being an occasional monitor lizard asleep on the path. If I chose to ride, I could do a climb of Mount Faber, followed by a steady Kranji loop, enjoy the lights of Johor Bahru on the Malaysian coast and be home around 7 am, peaceful and invigorated, soaked in sweat and ready to take on whatever the day might bring.

On a Saturday morning, I would bypass the bigger rides and go with one or two other triathletes for a 180km tour of the island which, since the island is just 50km by 27km, involved some creative navigation. We would stop at several points to buy a cold drink. We would start in the dark (sunrise and sunset are at 7 all year round that close to the equator), and finish with the sun high in the sky. I would occasionally end my long ride with an out-and-back along Rifle Range Road, where a troop of monkeys (a flattering noun; a “rabble” would be more appropriate) lived and frolicked. I would watch them while they ignored me, have a last drink of water, remind myself that this tropical world was my home, wonder if it was snowing in Washington, and roll back down to Bukit Timah Road and home.

In the years since I left Singapore, I have lived again in Washington, DC; Austin, Texas; Italy; Portugal; Greece and now the French countryside. There is nowhere quite like Singapore, and even now, when I catch a flight or wake before dawn or visit a market or click into my pedals for a long ride, I remember how that small island challenged and inspired me, personally and professionally, for eight wonderful years and forever changed my sense of what is possible. ♦

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